Chapter 10

Personal Relations as a Core Feature of Feudalism

Introduction

One of the most important elements of feudalism in contemporary society is the role of personal relations in politics, the economy, and other spheres of public life. Personal relations can be separated into two types. One is based on the interaction between independent subjects who try to achieve their goals through mutual help, and the other is based on clientele principles (or suzerain-vassal relations), which suppose a hierarchy in the relations between people. The second type of relations is more socially important and will be the main subject of this chapter.¹

The high role of personal relations and kinship in social life is one of the main characteristics that separate Middle Ages societies (or societies close to the feudal model) from the totalitarian and liberal societies. This circumstance should not be considered a plus or a minus of Middle Ages societies or other primitive societies where these relations were so important. In some cases, personal relations help organize social life and create order. For many people, even in the United States, the high impact of the personal factor on decisions in the economy or politics is considered a normal aspect of life and not a form of corruption, with which personal relations are often linked. Adam Bellow, in his book In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History, recognizing the great scope of nepotism in American society, contended that a “New nepotism” in America was beneficial for the economy and other spheres of social life.²

1. V. Shlapentokh, Contemporary Russia as a Feudal Society © Vladimir Shlapentokh 2007

2. Adam Bellow, In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History
This opinion is widely shared by ordinary Russians, who do not consider the high role of the personal factor and nepotism as a major evil in society. They are much more hostile toward extortion, bribes, and embezzlement than toward the impact of personal relations on the behavior of officials or businesspeople. Asked what they understood by the term “corruption” in the Fund of Public Opinion survey in 2006 (which used open questions), the Russians placed “bribes” (39 percent) in the first place, followed by stealing among the high echelons of power (15 percent), abuse of power (9 percent), and finally nepotism (2 percent). Some Russian intellectuals, such as Andrei Konchalovskii, have lambasted the influence of nepotism in contemporary Russia and compared it with the influence of kinship on political life in the Middle Ages. However, these authors do not find support among the ordinary Russians who consider nepotism an unavoidable development in everyday life.

Marxists and social scientists who incorporated, in one form or another, the idea of “objective” stratification of society were right when they suggested that society is usually divided into classes, groups, or strata on the basis of various objective factors, including economic and social statuses, economic and political interests, demographics, and place of residence.

However, the vision of society based on the feudal model, and particularly of societies with weak states, as in the case of post-Soviet Russia, allows us to see another type of division based on clans, “teams,” and “cliques,” which unite people who are loyal to the same leader. The members of a clan support each other not because of their common social status or origin, as Marxists like to stress (even if these factors are indeed quite important), but because they share the same fate and will prosper or perish together—the sort of behavior and mentality seen in movies and television shows such as *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Russia was divided not only into rich and poor, educated and noneducated, residents of metropolitan areas and small cities, people living in the west and the east, Russians and non-Russians, and citizens and illegal immigrants, but also into different clans, people using different “roofs” and having different patrons.

Among other key areas of social life in which the role of personal relations is especially high is the selection of people for various positions in society, particularly in management, politics, the economy, and culture. In fact, there is little doubt that the magnitude of the personal factor in the selection of cadres and in the character of supervision over their work highly influences the efficiency of all major